Attainment Goals and Maintenance Goals: the Appeal of Approach Versus Avoidance Framed Strategies

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We explore differences between attainment and maintenance goals and how they influence inclinations towards approach and avoidance framed strategies in the savings domain. We find that maintainers experience more pride than attainers and that during maintenance (attainment), approach (avoidance) framed strategies are more appealing.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Self-regulation research suggests that different strategies become more appealing at different stages of goal pursuit (e.g., Huang and Zhang, 2013). Despite important findings on how strategy selection can improve motivation however, our understanding of this phenomenon thus far is primarily concerned with goal attainment. Yet, goal attainment and maintainers approach their self-regulation goals differently, leading to important behavioral outcomes (Jiraporn and Desai 2010). Given the high rates of relapse during maintenance, our research explores how motivation can be improved through appropriate strategy selection during maintenance as well as attainment stages of a savings goal. Additionally, while past research has examined the influence of different goal pursuit strategies, our research investigates the role of framing the same strategies as either approach (e.g. cook your meals at home) or avoidance (e.g. avoid eating out). In doing so, the primary questions that we explore are: Could a reason for relapse in maintenance be that after attaining a goal, the adopted strategies lose their appeal? Can re-framing these strategies boost motivation and improve self-regulation? To answer these questions, we focus on the role of different emotions, and particularly pride, in creating a divergence among the appeal of approach and avoidance strategic frames for goal attainment and maintainers. We argue that maintainers, because they experience more pride, will refuse to be restricted through avoidance strategies and find approach-framed strategies more appealing.

Across 5 experiments we manipulate goal type through a scenario telling respondents that their savings were either at (maintenance condition) or below (attainment condition) the recommended level. Strategy framing was manipulated through a recommended list of either approach (e.g. cook your own meals more frequently) or avoidance (e.g. do not eat out frequently) framed strategies.

In Study 1 (n=65 MTurk participants), subjects read a scenario prompting them to think about maintaining their savings at 10% of monthly income, followed by the strategy framing manipulation. Results showed that respondents found approach-framed strategies more appealing than avoidance-framed strategies (F(1, 61) = 6.58, p<.05), were more likely to adopt them (F(1, 61) = 6.57, p<.05), and were willing to use them for a longer time (F(1, 61) = 3.88, p=.05).

Study 2 (n=87 MTurk participants) explored results from Study 1 at higher savings goals (20% of monthly income) and provided a preliminary analysis of the level of pride among goal maintainers. Following the maintenance scenario, respondents reported their likelihood to adopt the suggested strategies and completed the four-item pride scale (α=.96). Maintainers were more likely to adopt approach than avoidance-framed strategies (F(1, 85) = 3.45, p=.06) and their level of pride was significantly higher than the midpoint (t = 7.58, p<.001).

Study 3 (n=85 students), compared the appeal of approach and avoidance-framed strategies among goal maintainers and attainers. Results showed a significant interaction between goal type and strategy framing on the appeal of the strategies (F(1, 81) = 4.99, p<.05) and respondents’ likelihood to use them for a long time (F(1, 81) = 8.77, p<.01). Maintainers found approach framed strategies more appealing and were more likely to use them for a long time than avoidance framed strategies (all p<.01).

Study 4 (n=113 MTurk participants) was conducted to test if the insignificant results in Study 3 were due to the student sample. Similar to Study 3, we found a significant interaction between goal type and strategy framing on likelihood to adopt the suggested strategies (F(1, 109) = 7.28, p<.01) and the length of time they would be willing to use them (F(1, 109) = 6.99, p<.01). Maintainers were more likely to adopt approach than avoidance (p=.08) while attainers were more likely to adopt avoidance than approach framed strategies (p<.05). Similarly, maintainers were willing to use approach framed strategies for a longer time than avoidance framed strategies (p=.05) whereas attainers were willing to use avoidance framed strategies for a longer time than approach framed strategies (p=.08).

Study 5 (n=117 MTurk participants) explored whether pride was underlying the effects found in Study 4. Results revealed that maintainers experienced higher pride than attainers (p<.001). We also found a significant interaction between goal type and strategy framing on likelihood to adopt the suggested strategies (p<.05). Attainers were more likely to adopt avoidance than approach (p<.01) framed strategies. While maintainers were directionally more likely to adopt approach than avoidance framed strategies, this effect was not significant. We found support for our hypothesized moderated mediation such that the effect of goal type on one’s likelihood to adopt a strategy through pride depends on the framing of the strategy (Hayes, 2013; model 14). Conditional indirect effects showed that for approach strategies, the indirect effect of goal type on likelihood to adopt the strategy is significant (conditional indirect effect = .55, 95% CI = .23 to .96).

Results from five studies show that goal maintainers and attainers differ in their inclinations towards approach and avoidance framed strategies. Results from the moderated mediation analyses suggest that differences in level of pride may explain why attainers and maintainers differ in their inclinations towards approach framed strategies. Our findings contribute to research in self-regulation by investigating how level of pride and strategic inclinations may be different in the attainment and maintenance stages of goal pursuit. They also offer a practical solution on how motivation may be retained during the maintenance stage of goal pursuit.

REFERENCES